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TAGS: PREL PTER ELAB KISL ASEC LE

SUBJECT: MGLE01: TWO "MARCH 14" MINISTERS AND ONE AOUN MP
ON BEIRUT'S MAY 10 ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATION

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Two of Prime Minister Siniora's "March 14" cabinet ministers criticized Hizballah's support for a anti-government demonstration on May 10, pointing at the incongruity of Hizballah supporting an effort to bring down a cabinet in which it participates. They were considerably more forgiving of Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, saying Berri and his Amal Movement had little choice but to go along with the demonstration. One suggested that a low pro-Aoun, Christian turnout in the demonstration might lead Aoun to reconsider his strategy of trying to unseat the pro-Siniora majority through early parliamentary elections. Saying that Amal and Hizballah participated for "political" reasons, even a pro-Aoun MP asked, "why would they demonstrate against their own government?" The pro-Aoun MP said that Aoun supporters demonstrated out of genuine grievances with the Siniora government's economic policy, and -- as part of the opposition -- were justified in doing so. End summary.

HIZBALLAH HAS ITS CAKE AND EATS IT

¶2. (C) In a May 11 conversation with Ambassador, USAID mission director, and emboff, Tourism Minister Joe Sarkis said it was "disturbing" that that fellow ministers in Prime Minister Siniora's cabinet had participated in the anti-government demonstration of May 10. It was particularly ironic that the Minister of Energy and Water, Mohamad Fneish, and the Minister of Labor, Trad Hamadeh -- a card-carrying member of Hizballah and non-card-carrying supporter of Hizballah, respectively -- were both active participants in the demonstration, said Sarkis, who represents Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces in the cabinet.

¶3. (C) "They did nothing" to improve government services in their areas of responsibility since taking office, Sarkis said of Fneish and Hamadeh. Even so, they still had the gall to help orchestrate public demonstrations against their cabinet colleagues. "We are going to talk about this" in the cabinet, he warned. Prime Minister Siniora had already publicly referred to this problem in a "diplomatic way."

Sarkis doubted Siniora would be confrontational with Fneish and Hamadeh, however.

¶4. (C) In a separate May 11 meeting, the Ambassador asked acting Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat about the incongruity of cabinet members at the forefront of protests aimed at bringing down that cabinet. "It's difficult for us to explain, too," said Fatfat, who like Sarkis is a "March 14" minister, albeit one belonging to Sa'ad Hariri's Future Current. He noted that Fneish, just a few weeks earlier, had gone on record in support of hiring public sector employees on a contract basis. Opposition to that initiative was the ostensible reason for the May 10 demonstration.

¶5. (C) In any event, this was not the first time that sitting cabinet ministers had maneuvered against their own cabinet, Fatfat said. Even his fellow "March 14" allies, such as Walid Jumblatt and Marwan Hamadeh, had played quasi-opposition roles as members of previous cabinets. Of course, "Walid is a special case," he laughed.

GIVING BERRI A PASS

¶6. (C) Sarkis was much more charitable towards Hizballah's current partner and traditional rival in the Shi'a community, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and his Amal Movement. Berri, like Hizballah, has representatives in Siniora's cabinet and likewise endorsed (at the last minute) the May 10 demonstration. However, Berri was "not convinced" by the rationale for the demonstration, Sarkis claimed. With all of his parliamentary bloc members dependent on Hizballah votes, Berri ultimately had no choice but to participate, in Sarkis's view.

¶7. (C) Fatfat likewise explained away Berri's support for the demonstration, saying Berri was in a "very difficult" position politically. Had Berri not cast his lot with

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Hizballah, he would have been "out of the game." Fatfat gave Berri credit for playing a weak hand strongly, given that "90 percent" of Shi'as support Hizballah, not Amal.

LAF-ISF COOPERATION KEPT DEMONSTRATION PEACEFUL

¶8. (C) Fatfat credited good coordination between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the civilian Internal Security Forces (ISF) for the fact that the May 10 demonstration took place without any violence. He said he had been meeting more frequently with Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Elias al-Murr, as was ISF director-general Ashraf Rifi with LAF commander Michel Suleiman. There had also been good coordination with Hizballah, according to Fatfat. Specifically, the government had made it clear to Hizballah that it would hold Hizballah responsible for any disruptions.

HOW EXTENSIVE WAS PRO-AOUN PARTICIPATION?

¶9. (C) Sarkis claimed that, despite a mobilization effort by Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and its allies, Christian participation in the May 10 demonstration was negligible. What had appeared on the surface as a significant pro-Aoun turnout was not what it had seemed. Sarkis said he had heard from Lebanese security officials that many of the demonstrators clad in orange (the FPM's official color) were in fact Shi'as from the southern suburbs of Beirut, a stronghold of Hizballah.

¶10. (C) Sarkis suggested that this meant support for Aoun among Christians was falling. "Yesterday was an important day for Christians," he said, in that it led many of them to

conclude that Aoun's agenda -- linked as it was to the agendas of Syria and Iran -- was not necessarily their own. Sarkis expected Aoun to try to explain a disappointing showing by claiming that only a segment of his support base, mainly teachers and some other public employees, were involved in the demonstration, and that the demonstration was not a "political" issue.

¶11. (C) Fatfat went even further, claiming that there had been no pro-Aoun Christians in the demonstration. Rather, virtually all of the demonstrators were Shi'as. He noted that (Hariri-owned) Future Television had even shown footage of Hizballah supporters donning orange clothing before marching in the demonstration. Perhaps, Fatfat suggested, Aoun had hesitated to mobilize his presumably strong support in the Christian community. Alternatively, perhaps Hizballah did not want to implicate Aoun directly in the demonstration, fearing that it might provoke sectarian clashes.

OTHER GROUPS OPTED OUT, TOO

¶12. (C) As for other demographic and regional groups, Fatfat said that the turnout from Tripoli, for example, had been as low as 200-300 participants despite the best efforts made by local pro-Syrian politicians, such as former Prime Minister Omar Karami. Confessional calculations had probably been at work here (after all, "it's Lebanon," Fatfat shrugged). Specifically, many would-be participants from predominantly Sunni Tripoli, figuring that the demonstration would be dominated by another confessional group, the Shi'as, appeared to have thought better of it and opted out.

WILL AOUN RECONSIDER HIS
"ELECTIONS NOW" STRATEGY?

¶13. (C) Fatfat did not think that the way Hizballah eclipsed all other participants in the demonstration would have much impact on Omar Karami, for example, who was on his way out of Lebanese political life anyway. As for Aoun, Fatfat said, "I'm asking myself: what will Aoun do now?" The experience of May 10 might lead Aoun to reconsider his call for holding parliamentary elections immediately. This seemed more likely, given reports that the confrontational rhetoric of the demonstration had not gone down well in Christian areas, according to Fatfat.

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AOUN BLOC MP: "WE'RE NOT IN GOVERNMENT,
AND WE HAVE A RIGHT TO DEMONSTRATE"

¶14. (C) In another May 11 meeting, MP Farid El Khazen, a member of Aoun's parliamentary bloc, told emboff that Hizballah's and Amal's participation in the May 10 demonstration was "political," and had nothing to do with the Siniora government's economic reform plan. El Khazen said that Aoun supporters participated in the demonstration because they genuinely were unhappy with the government's incomplete economic reform agenda. El Khazen criticized Siniora's plan as consisting only of half measures, developed without consulting anyone else in government or society.

¶15. (C) Asked if the FPM had an economic reform agenda of its own, El Khazen replied that they were developing a proposal that would take into account necessary administrative reforms, especially plans to limit government spending and corruption. "We support a small government and small military. We have to start by cutting government spending," El Khazen said.

¶16. (C) Asked about pro-Lahoud and pro-Syrian chants heard during the May 10 demonstration, El Khazen again pointed to Hizballah and Amal. "This is political," he said, "it had

nothing to do with economics or reform. They are in the cabinet, why would they demonstrate against their own government? We (the FMP) are out of government, though. We're the opposition. We have a right to demonstrate."

FELTMAN